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"NEW" AMERICANS AGAINST "OLD" EUROPEANS: THE STRANGE CULTURAL POLITICS OF WASHINGTON IRVING'S "RIP VAN WINKLE"

"Rip Van Winkle" has widely been seen as one of the fundamental texts signaling the birth of the American short story, and as Irving's most felicitous description of the "American national character" - elusive and oversimplifying though this term may be. "From the beginning", Hershel Parker writes, "Americans identified with Rip as a counter hero, an anti-Franklinian who made a success of failure, and successive generations have responded profoundly to Irving's pervasive theme of mutability, especially as localized in his portrayal of the bewildering and destructive rapidity of change in American life"[1]. Leaving aside for the moment the dubious claim with respect to Rip's "success" which springs "[out] of failure", it is worth asking whether Irving's purpose was indeed to elicit this kind of response. Or, to put it better, it would be interesting to know whether Irving actually wanted Americans to identify with a character whose credentials of success are negotiable, to say the least, and whose resistance to change, if amusing, is simultaneously disturbing, and raises serious questions about the meaning of identity, culture, and social definition.

My own view is that Irving, despite his easy-going disposition and notorious willingness to please[2] (which resembled

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[1] See Hershel Parker's introduction to Washington Irving, in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym et al., 6th ed., vol. B (New York: Norton 2003) 978-80.

[2] See Lewis Leary, *Washington Irving*. University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, number 25 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963) 20-25.

that of his famous protagonist), did not intend to create a mythic persona with which Americans could identify unproblematically. It seems to me, by contrast, that Irving's plans moved in the opposite direction: that of warning Americans, through Rip, about the potential danger of adopting his protagonist's carefree, irresponsible attitude. The accessible first layer that celebrates Rip's escape and adventures masks an intelligent subtext which criticizes this very nonchalance, and succeeds in alerting the early 19th century audience of the pitfalls that Rip's imitators will encounter without alienating it, and without accusing it directly of any irreparable mistake. In the lines that follow, I propose to give, firstly, a detailed analysis of how Irving combines myth-making with criticism - constructing, that is, the mythic character of Rip and undercutting his appeal precisely when the narrative reaches its climax - and secondly, explore the socio-cultural dynamics of such a strategy for the then emerging American short story.

Scholars agree that Irving was one of those writers most conscious of his "New World" status and most knowledgeable about European (primarily English) literature. He had lived nearly twenty years in Europe, in cities as diverse as London, Liverpool, Berlin, Paris, and Madrid, and was a friend of venerated figures like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Walter Scott, who introduced him to the richness of the German folktale. His style was also influenced by less known English satirical writers, namely, Oliver Goldsmith and Joseph Addison, and the very "Rip Van Winkle" abounds in references which demonstrate Irving's familiarity with European culture and history, ranging from German mythology to Don Quixote, and from William Shakespeare to Napoleon and the French Revolution[3]. His oeuvre seems to be equally representative of his attraction to England and the co-existent perception of himself as American, since it includes "worshipful tribute[s] to old fashioned English

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[3] See Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 105-107, and A. Walton Litz, ed., *Major American Short Stories*, 3rd ed. (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 5.

country life"[4], like *Bracebridge Hall* (1822) alongside the five-volume biography of George Washington[5], and the comic *History of New York* (1809) - the book that severed America's umbilical cord with the "Old World", as a London critic succinctly put it[6]. Opinions begin to diverge, however, when one begins to wonder whether Irving saw himself as more "American" or more "European"; nor can the question be answered by resorting to the way Americans saw Irving[7], because recent scholarship has come up with surprisingly contradictory views. The latest edition (2003) of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, for instance, states that when Irving returned to the United States in 1932, "his reputation was in need of redemption" from the charge of "becoming too Europeanized", but in his newly published *History of American Literature*, Richard Gray says no such thing, stressing in fact Irving's "enthusiastic welcome" by his fellow Americans[8]. "Rip Van Winkle" is perhaps the most characteristic story of the interaction between America and Europe in Irving's literary output, and it is a story that, for all its intense attachment to the European past, seems to have been perceived as guiding advice for the American future.

Before going any further, it must be granted that this is not a claim the majority of Irving's critics would accept unreservedly, since the writer's name is more often associated with light-heartedness (or even frivolity), rather than didacticism or intentional seriousness. Part of the reason why Irving's more "didactic" side has been neglected by the writer's scholars lies in the disproportionate attention paid to his stylistic preferences;

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[4] See Parker, *The Norton Anthology*, 979.

[5] Washington Irving, *The Life of George Washington* (1855-59).

[6] Quoted in Leary, 18.

[7] The same question can be addressed, of course, to Irving's European audience, although the case seems to be much clearer: English readers, for instance, were always impressed by Irving's ability "to write in such an English way about English scenes", but his U.S. citizenship was substantial proof of his "otherness"; see Parker, *The Norton Anthology*, 979.

[8] Gray, 107; Parker, *The Norton Anthology*, 979.

interestingly enough, Irving himself is no less guilty for this one-dimensional track scholarship has followed, since statements like "the author must be continuously piquant; woe to him if he makes an awkward sentence or writes a stupid page"[9] hardly invite comments on the ideological profile of either the story or the writer. When, however, scholars warn us that "it will not do to think of Irving as a complicated man" (Leary 43) - implicitly suggesting that his writings are simple, "feel good" pieces which do not tackle serious topics - the situation becomes rather problematic. And it becomes problematic because the above critical stand refuses to take into account not only the various socio-political debates embedded in some of Irving's most well known stories, but also the writer's conceptualization of American literature as a whole. Nevertheless, it is my contention that stories like "Rip Van Winkle" serve a more complex purpose and that, for all his eagerness to please and entertain, Irving also intended to comment on the social reality of his time and, to a certain extent, rectify what he thought was wrong. Rip Van Winkle's temporary escape from his own reality, therefore, was less the articulation (or the externalization) of the writer's secret wishes, as it was the ideal vehicle for voicing his political and cultural concerns.

The first instance which shows the complexity of Irving's project can be found in the story's narrative technique: Irving's decision to "frame" the adventure of Rip Van Winkle within the supposedly authoritative account of the fictive historian Diedrich Knickerbocker serves a double purpose: it ascribes to the story the prestige of historical research, and simultaneously protects Irving from the possible dissatisfaction of the perceptive reader - in other words, of the reader that would directly decipher the social critique entailed in Rip's twenty-year sleep. The opening paragraphs of the story are particularly revealing:

> The following Tale was found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker, an old gentleman of New York, who was very curious in the Dutch

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[9] See Leary, 30.

> history of the province, and the manners of the descendants from its primitive settlers. His historical researches, however, did not lay so much among books, as among men; for the former are lamentably scanty on his favourite topics; whereas he found the old burghers, and still more, their wives, rich in that legendary lore, so invaluable to true history. Whenever, therefore, he happened upon a genuine Dutch family, snugly shut up in its low-roofed farm house, under a spreading sycamore, he looked upon it as a little clasped volume of black-letter, and studied it with the zeal of a bookworm.
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> The result of all these researches was a history of the province, during the reign of the Dutch governors, which he published some years since. There have been various opinions as to the literary character of his work, and, to tell the truth, it is not a whit better than it should be. Its chief merit is its scrupulous accuracy, which, indeed, was a little questioned, on its first appearance, but has since been completely established; and it is now admitted into all historical collections, as a book of unquestionable authority[10].

Despite the light and playful tone of this opening, Irving's repetition of the word "history" and the phrase "historical research" suggests the serious implications of "Knickerbocker's" tale, especially if we consider that the above phrases are accompanied by words such as "zeal", "true", "accuracy" or "unquestionable authority". What Irving wants to say to the reader is that "what you see inside depends on what I place outside", and what he places outside is the "completely established" authority of his fictive historian. But why does Irving seem so determined to present his narrative as one belonging to "true history"? Quite simply, because this is what he feels is missing from American

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[10] Reprinted from the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 980-992; all quotations hereafter correspond to this text.

literature in general, and the American short-story in particular: the prestige of a history shaped by both cultural production and social upheaval, in other words, the prestige of a history that would put an end to the cultural dominance of America's "European" affiliations[11]. "Rip Van Winkle", as the closing piece of Irving's *Sketch Book* (1819) underlines the writer's intention to prove that American literature can be as important as that of the Europeans, and he does this by employing the very element a European reader would find lacking: the element of a credible historico-cultural continuity. The gesture is as clever as it is politically significant: the European reader is treated by Irving with an attitude characteristic of both mockery and deference, and the American reader is assured that his own history is as stimulating as the European, since it is has given birth to the legendary Rip.

Given the elevated status that Irving wanted to ascribe to his country's history and cultural potential, it is rather unlikely that he envisioned Rip as *the* social model with which Americans could identify; consider, for instance, the following lines:

> The great error in Rip's composition was an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labour. [...] In a word, Rip was ready to attend to anybody's business but his own; but as to doing family duty, and keeping his farm in order, it was impossible.
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> In fact, he declared that it was no use to work on his farm; it was the most pestilent little piece of ground in the whole country; everything about it went wrong, and would go wrong, in spite of him. (982-983)

Though it would be a shaky claim to insist that Rip's aversion

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[11] For a more detailed overview of Irving's attraction to Europe and his simultaneous wish to detach both himself and American literature from its influence, see also Leary, especially pages 29-33, and Gray, 105-107.

"to all kinds of profitable labour" goes against the so-called "American Dream", since the above term was invented to describe a social reality and aspirations which emerged (or, to be more accurate, came into consciousness) several decades later, it is obvious that Rip's incompetence in managing his farm was not intended as a flattering comment for the American people. If Rip represents the average American, as most critics would have it, then it follows that the average American is unable "to keep his farm in order", and that he needs someone else's assistance in order to conduct his everyday business. To the extent that, before Rip's twenty-year sleep, this "someone else" would be found in the face of the colonial ruler, it becomes evident that Rip's inefficiency does not pay America any service. In fact, if Rip is the average American and the (lamentable) condition of his farm a representation of America before the Revolution, then the only reasonable conclusion is that America was desperately in need of a radical social change – a conclusion that calls into question Irving's alleged skepticism with respect to progressive socio-political amendments.

The social change does of course take place, becoming evident to the reader right after Rip's twenty-year sleep – the result of his eagerness to drink a beverage of unknown origin in the company of unknown people who look like "the figures in an old Flemish painting" (986). The episode in the symbolically named "Union Hotel", which replaced "the little village inn" that Rip was familiar with is rightfully seen as one of the most hilarious scenes in the story, but this hilariousness goes hand-in-hand with Irving's incisive criticism. To make the above point clearer, it is doubtful whether the early 19th century reader would be charmed by Rip's failure to recognize either the American flag, or the portrait of George Washington – the leader of the American fight for independence and first President of the newly formed United States – and this uncomfortable feeling is naturally shared by the people in the Union Hotel, who consider Rip to be a "tory", a "spy" or a "refugee".

Similarly, the protagonist's puzzlement when he hears the people around him talking about "rights of citizens – election – members of congress – liberty – Bunker's hill – heroes of seventy-

six" is as embarrassing as it is funny, and can only elicit momentary sympathy for Rip's confusion. Even if we accept that Irving was aiming to satirize his contemporary Americans, with their "busy, bustling, [and] disputatious" character, he is very careful not to idealize the past that Rip is forced to leave behind. Instead, Irving makes it all too clear that "the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquility" of Rip's erstwhile companions are no longer legitimate options; it is certainly not coincidental that Van Bummel, the former schoolmaster, is portrayed as "doling forth the contents of an *ancient* newspaper[12] - a poignant reference to a period that was, even then, obsolete and ready to give way to something new. Thus, half-way through the story, Irving's readers become aware that much more than the adventure of a naïve day-dreamer is at stake, and that Rip's escape in the mountains symbolizes the most crucial transition in American history, the transition that changed both the world's perception of America, and Americans' own self-perception.

Furthermore, regardless of whether we decide to approach the political implications of the story based on the time of Rip's awakening (approximately 1803, when Thomas Jefferson would have been the President of the United States), or on the time the story was published (1819, when James Monroe would have taken over), the fact remains that Irving would think twice before valorizing the past at the expense of personalities who had significantly empowered his native country. It must be remembered, for instance, that Jefferson was the man who successfully negotiated with Napoleon the Louisiana Purchase (trebling thus American territory by 1803), and Monroe was the President who significantly limited European enterprises in the U.S. and annexed the state of Florida (previously under Spanish control).

The appearance of the *Sketch Book*, therefore, coincides with a historical period which not only marked America's detachment from Europe, but also America's increasing power; and we must certainly distinguish between Irving the man (who may have had his reservations about the political leaders of his

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[12] *Norton Anthology*, 988; emphasis mine.

time), and Irving the social commentator, who was acutely aware of the nation's euphoria over the expansion of America and the solidification of the "American" identity. He would never have proposed a (reactionary) return to the *status quo ante* - in other words, a return to a state of weakness and confusion. Remember that, in this earlier state, Rip's farm "could not be kept in order" and was therefore abandoned by its owner, whose only idea of change or improvement was synonymous with escapism and irresponsibility. Those who filled the gap during his absence, by contrast, managed most successfully the affairs of a much larger "farm", and therefore excessive nostalgia for the past would constitute a serious threat to what has been established. And what has been established, first and foremost is, as we said before, a distinct sense of identity - personal as well as collective. To get a more complete picture of Irving's intentions, let's discuss the climax of the story, which is no other than Rip's desperate plea to the people to tell him whether they have ever heard of his name:

> "Oh, Rip Van Winkle!" exclaimed two or three, "Oh, to be sure! that's Rip Van Winkle yonder, leaning against the tree".
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> Rip looked, and beheld a precise counterpart of himself, as he went up the mountain: apparently as lazy, and certainly as ragged. The poor fellow was now completely confounded. He doubted his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man. In the midst of his bewilderment, the man in the cocked hat demanded who he was, and what was his name?
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> "God knows", exclaimed he, at his wit's end; "I'm not myself - I'm somebody else - that's me yonder - no - that's somebody else, got into my shoes - I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they've changed my gun, and everything's changed, and I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!" (989)

Richard Gray has argued that Rip's doubts about his name and identity constitute "a gently comic response to a traumatic change, [offering] a genial reflection in miniature of the sudden, disconcerting process of alteration – and possible reactions to it – experienced by the nation as a whole". (Gray 106) Accurate though this point may be, I think that Irving's objective was to go beyond mere "reflection"; the image of Rip Van Winkle junior, who is "apparently as lazy, and certainly as ragged" as his baffled father may be amusing (and reassuring to the reader who sees "the process of alteration" as "disconcerting"), but conveys, nevertheless, a picture of a past that is far from enviable. Along the same lines, while it may be true that Rip's bewilderment and despair cannot be separated from their comic mantle, it is also true that this mantle cannot obscure the message that Irving wants to get across. And, for all the sympathy that the writer retains for Rip, this message is unambiguously (albeit implicitly) accusatory: Rip has lost his identity not because "everything's changed", but because he never participated in this change. When Rip's wish to escape from his everyday routine in the farm, where everything "went wrong and would go wrong", became a reality, the protagonist stopped being a member of society. It is therefore natural that, upon his return, he can no longer define his own identity, and has to rely on strangers to ascertain whether he truly is the person he claims to be. Having been away from his world too long, he has doubts about his identity. Irving tells you, in other words, that you have an identity only as long as you are a member of society – as long as you contribute something to this society. If you abandon everything, like Rip, you'll have to pay a price: the socio-historical developments will pass you by, and the world will not be your world. And the major socio-historical development that bypassed Rip is of course no other than the fight for America's independence. Rip slept the most productive years of his life away, without participating in the collective attempt to create "America". Consequently, he feels indifferent to the present and fails to comprehend the pride that his contemporaries take in their "Americanness". Thus, Rip is exposed to public criticism precisely at the moment of his

return, when one would normally expect a glorious vindication of the choices he made in his life, and he grows old without maturing and deprived of any solid sense of identity.

And the conclusion of the story elaborates on this very issue - identity in relation to "Americanness". As soon as the ragged old man is recognized as "Rip Van Winkle", the crowd around him "return[s] to the more important concerns of the election", and Rip's story becomes "a chronicle of the old times 'before the war'" (991). The people in the village eventually decide to accept Rip in their society, but the latter can no longer be an active member of it, since he does not understand how this society functions. Neither does he care about understanding any of the developments he failed to experience; as Irving says, "[Rip] was now a free citizen of the United States", [...] [but] the changes of states and empires made but little impression on him". (991) Rip thus occupies an even more marginal position than the one he occupied in his younger days, because a man who cannot understand the difference between freedom and subjection remains, essentially, asleep to the possibilities around him. Rip's punishment, scarcely perceptible to him but acutely impressed upon the reader, is his failure to do anything else than relate "chronicles of the past" - his failure to appreciate, in other words, the promise of the "American" future. As Lewis Leary has put it, Rip eventually becomes America's conscience, "amusing and accusing at the same time" (Leary 26).

Scholars have also seen Rip as "a symbol of the mythic American", presenting 'a near-perfect image of the way a large part of the world looks at [Americans]: likeable enough, up to a point and at times, but essentially immature, self-centered, careless and above all - and perhaps dangerously - innocent'[13]. The above comment appears somewhat dated, and is certainly open to dispute; it is doubtful, for instance, whether the modern reader would consider this "dangerous innocence" to be the prime trait of the American character. And yet, such comments are nevertheless applicable to the socio-historical period within

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[13] See Philip Young, "Fallen from Time: The Mythic Rip Van Winkle", *Kenyon Review* 22 (1960); quoted in Leary, p. 26.

which "Rip Van Winkle" was written, and can account for many of the contradictions the reader encounters in the story. What interests me, however, is not simply to delineate the various layers which comprise Rip's portrait, but to decipher why Irving has placed so much emphasis on the potential danger that his protagonist's attitude entails. And the most plausible answer is this: for all the nervousness engendered by the radical changes narrated throughout the plot, for all the nostalgia with which the past is invested and, finally, for all the comedy that pervades the story, "Rip Van Winkle" is ultimately a narrative about the future. Or, to put it better, the emphasis on the past, no matter how strong, cannot obscure the significance that Irving attaches to the future. And in a future oriented toward progress, independence, and detachment from the European influence, Rip (who cannot distinguish George the Third from George Washington) and his vision of America have no place.

Thus, arguments such as the following one by A. Walton Litz, according to which Irving "lacks the ability to deal economically with the contemporary American scene", and can produce "his splendid sketches" only "so long as he can deal with the rich tradition of England or Europe, or with the accumulated associations of the American past" (Litz 7) seem too restrictive today, as they overlook both Irving's awareness of the contemporary American scene, and his eagerness to establish America's difference from - rather than connection with - Europe. Even though "Rip Van Winkle" does not totally disrupt America's cultural debt to the "Old World" - and how could it do so, since the plot relies on an intriguing reworking of a German myth - and even though Irving does pay tribute to this debt, since he can only tell a story about America by using materials familiar to his European audience, the fact remains that Irving's narrative was primarily envisioned as an American response to the European literary tradition. Taking into account the time "Rip Van Winkle" was published, the anxiety of American authors to create a recognizable body of "originally American" literature, and the collective concern about the definition of "Americanness" / the "American" identity, it is obvious that Irving's story constitutes a strong statement about the

cultural power of the "New World". Americans, Irving argues, were politically and intellectually asleep when they were under European rule. Like Rip, who lost consciousness after tasting the beverage of the strange, Flemish-looking people, pre-Revolution Americans were in a state of stupor, a state that restrained their political and cultural potential. "Rip Van Winkle" teaches us, above everything, that they are now awake, and can therefore tell their own story - a story shaped equally by regression and progress, individualism and common effort, conservatism and liberalism - the "old" and the "new".

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